

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

John 20:1-18

March 27, 2016 Easter

Sunday/The Day of Resurrection

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Choir Introduction

*Woman, weeping in the garden, who has pushed the stone aside?
Who has taken Jesus' body, Jesus Christ the crucified?*

*Woman, waiting in the garden, after men have come and gone,
after angels give their witness, silently you watch for dawn.*

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?
WHOM ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

*Why are you crying? Why do you weep?
Who are you searching for? What do you seek?
The tomb is empty, the stone is rolled away.
Your Lord, once crucified, the one who bled and died,
With arms stretched open wide is standing by your side.
Open your eyes and see, open your heart
and know Jesus is risen, he is alive.
And he is with you now, and forever will keep you safely by his side,
In endless love abide. Why do you weep?*

One day, early in Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist was standing around with two of his disciples. As Jesus walked by, John said to his followers, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" John's two disciples followed Jesus. Jesus turned around, saw them following him, and asked them, "What are you looking for?" They called him "Rabbi," which means "Teacher," and asked him, "Where are you staying?" Jesus answered, "Come and see." One of the two disciples of John, who was named Andrew, went and found his brother, Simon, and told him, "We have found the Messiah."

One day, early in the morning, Mary Magdalene was standing outside Jesus' tomb, weeping. She saw Jesus standing there with her, but she didn't recognize him. Jesus asked her, "Whom are you looking for?" Mary said, "I'm looking for the body of my Lord." Jesus said to her, "Mary." Then Mary turned around and said, "Rabbouni," which means "Teacher." And Jesus said to Mary, "Don't hold on to me, because I haven't yet ascended to the Father." Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Two stories. One at the beginning of the gospel. One at the end of the gospel. Both stories have people following, seeking, hearing, and responding in faith. In both stories Jesus asks, “Whom are you looking for?” When Andrew and the other disciple followed Jesus, something new was beginning. Jesus said to them, “Come and see. Come and see what it’s all about.”

When Mary met Jesus at the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, something new was beginning. Many older translations of John’s gospel have Jesus telling Mary, “Don’t touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Newer translations, however, give us a better sense of what Jesus must have meant when he said to Mary, “Don’t hold on to me . . . Don’t cling to me.” Mary was holding on for dear life. Jesus tells her, “Let go for eternal life, let go for abundant life.”

On this Easter Sunday morning, Jesus asks us the same thing: “Whom are you looking for? Who do you say that I am?”

John’s gospel is full of symbolism. You can (and should) read his story on at least two different levels — the literal and the symbolic. He begins his Easter story with these words, “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” (John 20:1)

Of course it was still dark — it was early in the morning. But it was still dark for Mary as she made her way to the garden, because she was walking in the shadow of death. She didn’t get up that Sunday morning for an early Easter sunrise service in the cemetery. She got up early that Sunday morning, in the dark in many ways, to take care of the dead body of her beloved Jesus. She thought she would find him wrapped in linen cloths with one hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes.

In many ways, we come to this Easter Sunday worship in the dark today. The past couple of weeks have been hard and sad for our congregation, as we have buried Dr. Jack Robinson and Thomas Edgerton, two beloved members of our church and community. Our congregation and community are going through a rough spell where many friends, neighbors, and family members are struggling with serious health issues.

On the national level, we’re in the thick and throes of the presidential campaign. To a person, it seems, everyone (at least everyone I talk with) is upset with and uncertain about the tone of the rhetoric and behavior of the campaign.

On the international stage, our hearts are heavy because of the latest terrorist bombings in Brussels. Every day we read and hear about the continuing and escalating violence around the world, and we are afraid that terror will strike here at home again.

Then there are our own personal experiences that we bring to today’s Easter Sunday worship. Perhaps you are walking in the shadow of death this morning as you grieve your loved ones. Perhaps you are wrestling with difficult problems in life for which there seem to be no solutions. Perhaps you are mourning the loss of relationships. Perhaps you are facing unknowns that scare you. As the quote that makes its way around Facebook says, “Be kind. Everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on a Sunday morning in the midst of the stuff of life. We come to worship on a Sunday morning in the midst of the stuff of life. Mary Magdalene heard Jesus ask, “Whom are you looking for?” Still today we hear Jesus ask, “Whom are you looking for?” or, in the words we have heard throughout the Lenten season, “Who do you say that I am?”

What are we seeking this Easter Sunday?

Whom are we looking for on this Resurrection Day?

Are we here to pay our respects to a great and wise man who nobly died for a cause?

Are we here, hoping against hope that the news about Jesus being alive is really true?

Are we looking for a Messiah who will be at our beck-and-call when we need or want him?

Are we looking for a Savior who might surprise us, challenge us, offer us new life and new hope? Or are we holding on for dear life, afraid to let go?

Are we looking for Jesus and we don't even recognize him, even when he is standing right in front of us, because we don't expect to find the living among the dead?

Somebody told me the other day that she had run into someone she hadn't seen in quite a while, and her first thought (to herself) was, “Oh my, I thought you were dead!” Is it so hard to imagine that's what Mary Magdalene must have thought when the gardener gently called her by name? “Mary!” “Oh my God, I thought you were dead!”

Somebody else said the story about Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus unexpectedly in garden was kind of like seeing somebody out of context at the Piggly Wiggly. You have to think for a minute who the person is, because you aren't used to seeing them or aren't expecting to see them in that place.

In the dark — in the shadow of death — unexpected — Mary Magdalene meets Jesus and he says to her, “Mary!” Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus says, “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:2-4, 11)

Throughout the gospels, the risen Jesus is recognized by his friends and followers when he does something familiar:

* He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them — and their eyes are opened and they recognize him. (Luke 24:30-31)

* He calls to his disciples from the beach and tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. When they're not able to haul the nets in because there are so many fish, the beloved disciple says, “It is the Lord!” (John 21:6-7)

* He feeds his disciples a breakfast of bread and fish on the beach, and he takes the bread and gives it to them, and does the same with the fish. (John 21:9-14)

* He appears to his disciples and shows them his pierced hands and feet and says, “See that it is I myself.” (Luke 24:39)

Can you think of any more tender and poignant scene than the risen Jesus gently calling, “Mary”? As we heard “Mary Magdalene” tell us a few minutes ago, “That was all He needed to say! It was as if the scales from my eyes had been instantly removed. I knew this was Jesus, the living Christ, standing before me!” And Mary Magdalene did something when she recognized her Lord standing in front of her, calling her name: “The exhilaration in my spirit propelled me back to the disciples: ‘He is alive! Jesus is risen from the dead! I have seen Him! Praise be to God! Jesus is alive!’” (from the narration in the cantata, *Who Do You Say That I Am?*)

In the weeks leading up to our Easter celebration, we have heard Jesus ask many people, “Who do you say that I am?” The answers have been as varied as the characters in the stories:

* John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets, the Messiah (Mark 8)

* a conquering king coming in his glory (Mark 10)

* “I do not know or understand what you are talking about. I do not know this man you are talking about.” (Mark 14)

* “Are you the King of the Jews? So you are a king? What is truth?”

* No words, just actions — “He took the body down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb” (Luke 23)

Jesus asks us the very same question this Easter morning: “Whom are you looking for? Who do you say that I am?”

We may have come here this morning “in the dark” and under the shadow of death, but we’re not here to pay tribute to a dead martyr.

We’re here to celebrate Jesus who is alive. That’s whom we’re looking for. That’s who is standing beside us, calling us by name, calling us to “Come and see,” calling us to let go and live.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Let us pray: Jesus Christ, we greet you! You are alive, and the world can rejoice again. Hallelujah! Glory be to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Choir Response

*Woman, walking in the garden, Jesus takes you by surprise;
when the gardener calls you, “Mary!” faith and joy meet in your eyes.*

*Woman, dancing from the garden, find the others and proclaim
Christ is risen as he promised; tell the world he knew your name!*